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3 THE DISCUSSION LEADER'S JOB //

The important thing about a discussion is not the leader, but the subject that is being discussed. The reason for having a leader is to help the group in its examination of the subject. The leader keeps the discussion going, but does so as modestly as possible. The success of the discussion depends on everyone present.

The functions of a discussion leader are to encourage the expression of ideas all around the group; to see that facts are available when needed; to ask questions and make occasional summaries without letting his own views intrude; and to get rough stretches smoothed out without using a steam roller. In newly formed groups the leadership makes clear the part which members are to play. People who have been accustomed to sitting as listeners in lectures or other public meetings where they were not expected to say anything, often feel a certain strangeness at the first meeting where they themselves are the source of the program. A statement from the leader inviting everyone to take part and explaining that expression of variety of views is desirable is often of great help.

The first few minutes of a discussion period are apt to be the hardest. Will there be a stony silence or will people discuss? Your listening teams will assist you in breaking the ice and getting the discussion under way in each of the discussion sessions.

When the discussion is going well and contributions are coming in from all sides, you as a leader can aid the group considerably by making summaries from time to time which will help members to take stock of where they are. This will allow loose ends to be gathered up and sorted out before the argument proceeds further. Care should be taken that such summaries are confined to clear, brief statements of what has already been said without throwing in new ideas by the leader. You as a leader may ask the members to do this summing up. Summary by the group is particularly desirable at the end of the discussion.

The discussion leader need not be an authority. He should have some main facts but he should also:

1. Pass questions back to the group.
2. Gear the discussion, ask questions himself.
3. See that all angles of the question or point under consideration are brought out.
4. Help the group to distinguish facts and sound argument from prejudice, self-interest and "fixed" opinions.
5. As a discussion leader your main job should be to get the people to discuss, to bring out from the group rather than give it all to them.

6. Remember that the purpose of discussion is for education, for information, for correcting misunderstandings. Discussion is not necessarily for settling issues once and for all or for deciding on some specific course of action at the time.

If you are to be a good discussion leader, it is essential to have real appreciation for the functions and purposes of discussion. Some of these are as follows:

1. To obtain people participation, to help them feel that the program is theirs.
2. To create interest, to get the folks to thinking. Remember that you must not tell them that they have to think, but instead lead them to thinking.
3. To find out what the group wants to know, what problems or subject matter is of most interest to them. This helps to convey the impression that the program is theirs.
4. To make the general presentation of a short course or conference more effective or more convincing by having points discussed by the group or by having one or more persons tell their experiences or practices rather than having the main speaker do all the telling himself.
5. To uncover and develop new leadership.
6. To obtain the consensus of the group or majority opinion.
7. To use as a basis for planning of action.
8. To learn from the group what new things are being tried, what results are being achieved, what changes or trends are taking place, and what plans are being made.

Some Do's and Don'ts for Discussion Leaders

1. Help the group decide clearly what its purposes are. A discussion must have a useful purpose in order to interest people. The leader need develop this with his group in order to give them the feeling of being a part of the decision-making group rather than assuming a "this is it - take or leave it" attitude.
2. Take a thorough census of the problems as the group members see them. This is usually the only way in which the group will feel that it is dealing with problems that its own members see as important. Don't be worried if this original census doesn't bring out those problems which you as a leader might wish to see discussed. Be willing to let members get gripes and frustrations off their chests. As the group goes along and emerges as a true group press continually for statements of the real problem.

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3. Remember that people like to leave a discussion with a feeling of accomplishment and of objectives, or that progress was made. Frequent statements of progress should be made by your recorder and a final summary should be drawn up for the group at the end of the meeting.
4. Don't make a speech. Give everybody a chance to talk. There is nothing like a good discussion for "getting things off one's chest" and it helps to remove prejudice. Try to get quiet persons to speak and not let a few dominate the discussion. Don't ask too bluntly for comments from a person who would be overly embarrassed or is unduly shy. This means you need to know the people in your group. You need to be alert.
5. Don't purposely or annoyingly put a person "on a hot spot" and don't assume an "I told you so" attitude.
6. Lead or convince indirectly. Be a resource person at times but not simply as question answerer or walking encyclopedia, or "all wise." Pass questions from the floor back to the group, or to particular persons. Answer questions from the floor back to the group, or to particular persons. Answer questions indirectly by bringing out answers from the group. Remember to clinch points.
7. Don't find fault or be biased or cynical yourself. Lead discussion with fairness and objectivity.
8. Aim to capture the interests of the group immediately by putting the topic or problem for discussion before them without a lot of lost motion. Close working relations with your listening teams will insure rapid development of interest.

In good group discussion the leader is so much a part of the group and his leadership is so subtle that it often is difficult to tell who of the group is the leader.





